

Christ Centered Community is the centre of our life Acts 2:42-47, Romans 12:9-20

How are we following Jesus? What does God call us to do and be? Who are we here at North Star Mennonite Church?

In our attempts to be pure and faithful, which is to be commended, there has been great pain and heartache. In an honest history book of a Mennonite congregation, focusing on 140 years of ministry, we read these words. (Floradale MC - Forged Anew) "Disagreements were now in the open & unfortunately the personalities of some ministers entered into the conflict."

"A proposal (toward peace and unity) was brought forward – if Sunday School was dropped and abolished, a protest over evening meetings and English preaching would be withdrawn. This proposal was accepted...but these concessions did not solve all the problems and tensions grew between traditionalist and progressive elements of the church."

"Reconciliations were attempted throughout the 1880's...but the differences were irreconcilable, ...too great to bridge." (Other) issues included, "the acceptance of new forms of worship from other denominations, and the use of the new technologies of the world, such as telephones and buggies with collapsible tops." Being too worldly was a frequent concern - including how church people dressed.

"The rift began dividing along geographic lines (within the conference)...But some splits were not along geographic, economic or ancestral boundaries. Neighbors and families were often divided, leaving members on either side of the outcome." (In some families, the parents and each of the children joined separate churches of separate denominations.)

We are spending some time examining the fundamentals of being followers of Jesus as Anabaptist Mennonites. This is to help us set the stage for the next 500 years of church history. It seems we just happen to live at a time when our society is becoming more and more tolerant of

all faith perspectives, except Christianity. So we need to know who we are.

We have much in common with other Christians, but each group needs to know its own unique gifts and insights. Jack Trout says in his book, *Differentiate or Die*, "If an organization does not have something unique to offer, it will die." So we need to remind ourselves of our unique core values. Again today we are taking a broad overview of church history and focusing on Anabaptist theology. Last week we focused on Jesus as the centre of our faith.

One of the first things that **Jesus** did when he began his ministry was to form a community. He invited Peter and Andrew and then James and John to join him. Soon, there were many followers from whom he chose 12 disciples. They learned, ate, traveled and served together until at Pentecost they became the core of a new society called the church.

In Acts 2, we note that the first believers met day by day, not only in the Temple, but also in their homes where they ate with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of the people. The New Testament church provided an alternate way of living to both the religious and political realities of that day. This way of life was taught and celebrated in the temple court and was discussed and applied in home groups.

By referring to his followers in family terms, it became evident that Jesus wanted his followers to not only *believe* in him, but also to have a strong sense of *belonging* to each other. Observers were amazed at what God did in and through these groups of early Christians. They had the gifts, insights and courage to continue doing what Jesus had begun to do while he was with them. If you would have asked those first followers of Jesus, I believe they would have said, "*Christ-centered community is the center of our life!*"

But, as time went on, the original vision and practices changed. Instead of stressing the church as a family of brothers and sisters that

met together for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship, Emperor **Constantine** emphasized the church as an organization that met in large, impersonal sanctuaries. Wealthy men, who before had resisted conversion, were willing to join a church that was associated with the emperor. This gave them status. Large numbers of people were baptized whether or not they were true followers of Jesus. As a result, instead of the church being in the world, “the world” came into the church.

With the encouragement & help of his mother, Constantine began building large churches in Rome and on the sites of Jesus’ birth and death. Church and State or Politics merged together. Soon, church buildings were erected in nearly every town. Instead of saying, “Christ-centered community is the center of our life,” Christians began to say, “A church building is in the center of our city.”

Augustine, an influential early church leader, struggled hard to nurture a personal life of obedience in the context of a society that considered everyone to be a Christian. For him and his followers, it was impossible to distinguish between those who belonged to the body of Christ and those who did not. “The wheat and the weeds grow together,” he said.

Instead of experiencing the presence of Christ in community, Augustine emphasized experiencing the presence of God through the sacraments. A sacramental faith developed in which to be forgiven of original sin, one needed the ritual of baptism. To be forgiven of ongoing sin, believers needed the mass. As centuries passed, the understanding developed that to be released from purgatory, one needed to pray to the saints, give money to poor people, and buy grants from the pope.

Over time, the idea of belonging to Christ and to each other in close-knit community was largely lost. Those who wanted to follow Jesus obediently and to experience close community chose to become monks and nuns who lived in monasteries and convents – often way out in the country or desert. This gave the impression that

following Jesus in daily life and living relationally in Christ-centered community was impossible for common people.

Martin Luther and other reformers, around 500 years ago, originally intended to reform the church to its biblical basis. They separated themselves from the Roman Catholic Church, and in their preaching of the Bible, they began emphasizing the priesthood of all believers. Many followers of Luther and Zwingli also became eager to free themselves from the cruel feudal systems of the time. When some peasants took up arms to challenge the unjust practices of the feudal lords and princes, Luther and Zwingli, in the interest of maintaining order, ended up siding with the rulers. While they admonished rulers of their responsibilities toward the poor, they unintentionally forged a new alliance between church and state. In the process, they lost the confidence of many peasants, the common people.

Luther and Zwingli were prevented by the Peasants’ War and other political circumstances from implementing many of their intended reforms. They were able to lead change, but it didn’t go far enough. New denominations came out of their pastoring, but they continued with the basic structures of Constantine; the theology of Augustine; kept the state church as the polity of the church; the sanctuary as the structure of the church; infant baptism as the introductory rite into the church; the use of the sword by government as the tool for discipline; and the private interpretation of a flat Bible as the primary way of knowing God’s will.

Early Anabaptists, including **Menno Simons**, were disappointed with the incompleteness of the Reformation. They did not want to merely *reform* the church back to the structures set in motion by Constantine and the theology of Augustine. They wanted to *restore* the church to its original New Testament pattern and form. They believed that the church needed to be an independent and alternate society in the world.

Due to persecution, early Anabaptists, like the first believers in the early church, were forced to

meet in secret for Bible study, sharing, prayer and worship. In homes & secret settings, they often experienced Christ in their midst. As new believers placed their faith in Jesus Christ and pledged to follow him in daily life, they were baptized and received into a specific congregation where they had a strong sense of belonging.

These small groups had a powerful witness in their communities. After a study of 62 doctoral dissertations on Anabaptist beginnings and thought, Pastor Takashi Yamada, a scholar from Japan, came to believe that “the unique-ness of both the Early Church and the early Anabaptists was that they met in small groups where they confronted each other & made each other strong enough to confront the world.” Again, they confronted each other & made each other strong enough to confront the world.”

Anabaptist Christians spoke repeatedly of the power to live differently. They expected a “saintly life” from all their members and especially from their leaders. Rather than merely being free of guilt, they described faithful Christians as those who were living Spirit-filled, ethical lives. Those who stopped following Jesus in daily life or persisted in non-Christ-like living were excommunicated from the body of Christ.

The Anabaptists saw the church as being composed of transformed believers who were committed to Jesus and each other in covenant communities. Both Protestant and Catholic leaders viewed this as a threat to the established church. As a result, they imprisoned and severely persecuted many Anabaptists. More than 4,000 were drowned, beheaded, or burned at the stake as martyrs for their faith. The book Martyrs Mirror tells us many stories.

Much diversity was evident among these early Anabaptists. Some were overly concerned about the end times. Others reverted to using violence. A group in the city of Münster, Germany, went so far as to replace the elected city council with 12 elders who declared

themselves to be the New Israel, introduced polygamy, and took up arms in self defense. This action by a fringe Anabaptist group placed a negative reputation upon Anabaptist and Mennonite Christians that has in some circles persisted until the present time.

The early Anabaptists’ strong sense of belonging to Jesus and their loyal support of each other helped them to live devoted ethical lives in the context of a hostile world. If you would have asked them, I believe they would have said with the first disciples, “*Christ-centered community is the center of our life!*”

In today’s world, Christians with an Anabaptist perspective understand and practice Christ-centered community in three distinct ways:

First, forgiveness is essential for community. Jesus came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. He prayed fervently that we would be one with each other even as he is one with the Father. A warm sense of community and all the benefits pertaining to it emerge when members of the body of Christ are committed to asking each other for forgiveness. Confession and forgiveness remove the barriers that prevent fellowship with God and with each other. Anabaptist Christians believe that for-giveness is essential for creating and nurturing community.

The central problem of humanity is not the lack of finances, the lack of education or the lack of power. The central problem is that we offend each other. Again, the central human problem is that we offend each other. From the very beginning of time, human beings, both as individuals and as groups, have offended God and each other through their attitudes and actions. The result has been broken relationships with God, with each other, with our inner selves, and with the whole earth.

The turning point in resolving an offense usually comes when one party sincerely repents and asks for forgiveness. Unfortunately, in the non-Christian world, attempts are made to forget without forgiving. Often, defensiveness and

denial and alternative facts take the place of honest confession and forgiveness.

The second distinctive of Christ centered living is: 2. **The Scriptures are interpreted in community.** Many Christians limit themselves to the private study of Scriptures and then proclaim to others what they have personally understood them to say. When individuals limit themselves to such private interpretation, they over time arrive at and proclaim confusing and false understandings of Scripture.

Other Christians see trained pastors, priests and instructors as being the only ones who are capable of properly interpreting the Scriptures. As a result, lay people often neglect personal study and application. Christians from an Anabaptist perspective believe that the Bible Scriptures need to be studied both privately and in the context of a Spirit-guided community where fellow believers give & receive counsel. Generally, community members who come together in small groups, classes & conferences in the Spirit of Christ can best determine what a Scripture is saying to them about a particular situation.

Third, Christians with an Anabaptist perspective believe: **Community is experienced in face-to-face groups.** The church has some times been described as a two-winged bird. One wing represents the larger worshiping community where vertical relationships with our transcendent, holy God are emphasized. The other wing represents small face-to-face groups where close horizontal relationships are emphasized. Both wings are needed like the vertical and horizontal elements of the cross.

Some aspects of Christian living happen best in relational groups of 12 or fewer people. This is often true as we give & receive counsel, discern gifts for mission, and have fun and fellowship. Healthy congregations are structured for community. They are often networks of small groups. Some would go so far as to say that the small group is the basic unit of the church. In the early 70's & later there was a movement in various parts of the Mennonite Church to start

Koinonia groups or cell churches. I had the privilege to attend the worship of an intentional house church for a year. This is where people lived close together in various houses; some shared the same house; they worked to positively affect their local community; and they pooled all their income. So this model of close community emerges from time to time.

After being here for over six months, I enjoy the community here at North Star and Drake. It's good to hear the stories of how you have been community to and with each other. It's good to grieve what is being lost. But I wonder do people here know how special this place is? I also wonder, when you all are gone, how will this community in and around Drake change? Your Christ centeredness and your work at community has and continues to be a witness. And I wonder in what ways we can extend our church community and become more like the first Christians?

For Mennonite Christians, Jesus is at the centre of our faith. In summary for today's focus, Christians from an Anabaptist perspective experience *Christ-centered community as the center of their life*. They tend to see: 1. Forgiveness as being essential for community. 2. Dialogue and group discernment as necessary for the interpretation of Scripture. 3. Small face-to-face groups as central to the life of the church.

Believing in Jesus, *belonging* to the church, and *behaving* in a new way become real in the context of community. Are you, are we Anabaptist-minded Christians?

Taken from: What is an Anabaptist Christian, by Palmer Becker.
Missio Dei pamphlet Number 18

<https://www.mennonitemission.net/Downloads/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>